DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 168 CG 017 440

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TITLE Discrimination in the Lives of Older Black Women.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (Philadelphia, PA, April 6-9, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Blacks; *Coping; *Females; Individual Differences; Predictor Variables; Racial Bias; *Racial Discrimination; *Sex Discrimination
IDENTIFIERS Institutional Discrimination; Life Events

ABSTRACT

Black women have been described as being in "double jeopardy" due to the combined effects of racism and sexism. To explore the multiple effects of institutional discrimination and prejudice based on race and/or sex, the experiences of 52 highly successful older black women were examined, using tapes from the Black Women Oral History Project of Radcliffe College. Two situational variables were used: the predominant racial composition of the workplace where the respondent spent the major portion of her career; and life events, which were coded for coping style. Analyses of results showed that those whose life problems included racial and sexual discrimination, compared to those without discrimination, were more likely to use directly instrumental coping styles and to use more than one strategy in coping. Those who perceived control of the outcome as personal, and those who described the source of the problem as stemming from other people, were likely to use direct instrumentality in coping, and tended to have greater flexibility in coping styles. An analysis focusing specifically on the effects of situational and personal variables on coping strategies, within incidents of prejudice or discrimination, showed situational and personal factors were more significant predictors of coping. The findings suggest that an assessment of effective coping with discrimination must include examination of both situational and personal factors. (JAC)

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Discrimination in the lives of older Black women

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Social psychologists have long been interested in the study of prejudice (Allport, 1954). More recently, they have begun to distinguish between prejudice and institutional discrimination (Jones, 1972; Terry, 1970, 1981), the latter described as systematic policies of oppression directed against people of color and implemented by and through the institutions of our society. When the practices and policies that regulate our social order have evolved so as to systematically limit options available to Blacks and other people of color, whites no longer "need" to be highly prejudiced. That is, they can maintain the status quo while believing that race is increasingly irrelevant in determining success and advancement in our society. This distinction between personal attitudes and beliefs which inhere in the individual and systematic practices which inhere in our institutions irrespective of the personal beliefs of individuals involved, has been useful in better understanding the enduring quality of racism. However, most psychological research in this area has focused on racial prejudice.

CG 017440

*This research was conceived and planned in collaboration with Clara Mayo. Unfortunately as a result of her sudden death the article must be written without her. The research was conducted during a period when both Clara and I were doing research at the Henry A. Murray Center at Radcliffe College where the data is housed.

This paper was presented at the 54th annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Philadelphia, Pa., April, 1983.

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The emergence of the "second wave" of the movement for women's liberation once again raised the issue of prejudice and discrimination against women in bold relief. Although no specific theory of gender prejudice has been identified, psychological research on gender differences, on sex-roles, and on the higher costs women pay for being women as measured, in part, by increased incidence of mental illness is extensive. However the effects of institutional discrimination due to gender at the level of the individual have not been extensively explored.

The present study was designed to further the exploration of the multiple effects of institutional discrimination and prejudice based on race and/or sex by examining the experiences described by a small sample of highly successful older Black women. The existence of an oral history collection, the Black Women Oral History Project of the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College, provided an opportunity to listen directly to the voices of Black women as spoken to other Black women who recorded their oral histories.

Double jeopardy. Black women represent the principal target group for the combined effects of racism and sexism. Beale (1970) has described them as being in "double jeopardy"; Jackson (1972), among others, has identified some of the effects of this, arguing that the patterns of competency exhibited by different groups, for example, Black women, are constrained in part because they live in double jeopardy.

In seeming contrast to the starkness and negativity of the experiences of double jeopardy stands the reality of Black women as survivors who exhibit resourcefulness, flexibility, and creativity. A reading of literature produced by Black women "allows us to see that they do not regard themselves either exclusively or primarily as victims. On the contrary the literature overflows with the culture of resistance, with strategies for survival, with tactics for revenge, with humor and resilience" (Aptheker, 1982, p.11). Recent historical and sociological work (see, for example, Stack, 1974; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982) documents the powerful roles of resistance of Black women from slavery to the current day.

Racism, sexism, and coping with discrimination. The present study provides one small testimony of this resistance through examining Black women's descriptions of experiences of institutional oppression and individual prejudice and their strategies for coping with them. Based on earlier theory and limited resarch I argued that selected situational factors, that is, the racial composition of the workplace and the type of discrimination (i.e. racial or sexual), would differentially affect how one copes with experiences of discrimination. Further, the perception of the source of the problem, that is, as having to do with other people (or prejudice) or as having to do with institutional or societal factors (or discrimination) and one's sense of control over the outcome were also expected to affect one's coping.

There is some difficulty in comparing different coping strategies. To some extent the reason people choose the particular battles they will engage in is based on a range of personal and situational factors related to their indvidual life struggle and/or the historical moment in which they encounter the problem. From another perspective people are constrained by the reality of the "givenness" of their social existence and experience little choice in whether or not to engage a problem. The experience of double jeopardy is one such example of the "givenness" of Black women's social reality. It is precisely because of this complexity that this study examines the relative effects of selected personal and situational factors in predicting effective coping.

Coping is used here in a restricted sense to describe behavior in response to a particular problem. More specifically, coping refers to an individual's effort to master conditons of threat, harm or challenge that she or he perceives and that result from a problem situation. Coping as defined in this study incorporates a sensitivity both to the degree of instrumentality and to the degree of flexibility exhibited in ways of dealing with problems. It was expected that the personal and situational factors identified above would vary in the extent to which they predicted either direct or flexible coping or both.

Method

Description of the data set. Seventy-one oral history transcripts were collected for the Black Women Oral History Project. The women interviewed came from various fields of endeavor and different geographic locations and included, among others, church and community activists, leaders in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, physicians, librarians, and teachers. Although involved in a variety of fields and from different geographic areas this sample of American Black women were weighted towards educated middle and upper middle class women. In sum, they are women whose contributions and achievements led to the improvement of the quality of life of Black people especially in the 1940s and the 1950s.

Sample. Data from 52 of the original 71 oral histories was available for this study. Twenty-two percent (22%) of this sample has less than a BA, while 24% have earned a college degree, 29% a Masters degree, and 25% have obtained doctorates. Seventy-four percent (74%) married at least once during their lives but only 50% of the total sample had children.

Variables of interest. The primary predictor variables included two situational factors and two person-level variables. One situational variable was coded to determine the predominant racial composition of the organization in which the respondent spent the major part of her career. Fifty-six (56%) percent of the sample worked in predominantly Black organizations as their place of primary employ whereas 44% worked in predominantly white organizations.

All other variables were coded from the interviewee's descriptions of critical life events or life problems. Coding systems for these life problems and other variables were developed in consultation with older Black women in the greater Boston area who served as consultants to the project. Efforts were made to develop categories from the data itself, rather than to impose systems developed from other dissimilar samples. Detailed descriptions of each coding system are available for those interested. In summary, life problems were coded for the following variables:

1. the presence or absence of racial or sexual discrimination;

2. the source of the problem, that is, whether the problem was described on the one hand as having to do with other people, or as prejudice, or, on the other hand, as having to do with institutions or society, or as discrimination;

3. the perception of the control of the outcome as one's own (or personal) or some combination of oneself and other forces (or composite); and,

4. the coping strategy.

More specifically, the life problem was coded for the degree of instrumental coping (ranging from passive or noninstrumental coping, scored 0, to directly instrumental coping, scored 3). Each respondent also received a score for flexibility of coping styles which was derived from the number of different styles of coping she employed across her life problems. Interrater reliabilities for these 4 coding systems ranged from .88 to .95.

Results

Initial analyses investigated the effects of selected situational and personal factors on the degree of direct instrumental coping and flexibility of coping strategies employed across all life problems for these 52 Black women. The dependent variables were analyzed by a two-way analysis of variance with the following independent variables: presence of discrimination (none, racial, racial and sexual), the predominant racial composition of one's primary workplace (Black, white), perception of the source of the problem (prejudice, society), and perception of the control of the outcome (personal, composite). Significance levels reported throughout the paper are two-tailed.

These initial analyses revealed that those whose life problems included racial and sexual discrimination were significantly more likely than those without discriminaton in their life problems to use more directly instrumental coping styles ($F(2,46)=3.15$, $p=.05$), and to use more than one strategy or style of coping in addressing the problems ($F(2,46)=3.70$, $p=.03$).

Those who perceived control of the outcome as personal and those who described the source of the problem as having to do with other people were significantly more likely to use direct instrumentality in coping ($F(1,46)=8.45$, $p=.006$; $F(1,46)=4.84$, $p=.03$; respectively) and tended to have greater flexibility in coping strategies, $F(1,46)=3.73$, $p=.06$; $F(1,46)=2.40$, n.s.).

These analyses suggest that the presence of discrimination in one's descriptions of life problems has a significant effect on one's coping strategies and further that across a wide range of life problems flexibilty of coping strategies and the degree of instrumentality in one's coping style seem to function in similar ways, forming a single pattern of effective coping. A positive correlation (r=.25) between these two coping variables, although not statistically significant, supports this conclusion.

The next step was to examine more closely the relationship of these predictors to life problems containing incidents of racial and sexual discrimination. This set of analyses focused specifically on the effects of these situational and personal variables on coping strategies within incidents containing descriptions of prejudice or discrimination. Again, the dependent variables were analyzed by two-way analyses of variance.

In contrast to the first set of analyses interactions between situational and personal factors emerge as more significant predictors in examining Black women's coping with prejudice and discrimination. More specifically, those who worked in predominantly Black organizations and saw the source of the problem as prejudice and those who worked in predominantly white organizations and saw the source of the problem as societal or institutional forces were significantly more likely than the other two groups to use direct instrumentality in coping with these incidents, $F(1,31)=4.54$, $p=.04$). Those working in Black organizations who perceived the outcome to be controlled by a combination of their own and other more external forces (composite control) and those in predominantly white organizations who perceived

themselves to be personally in control of the outcome tended to use more flexibility in coping with situations, $F(1,31)=2.97$, $p=.09$.

In the first set of analyses, that is, those involving the range of life problems the degree of instrumentality and the degree of flexibility of coping formed a simple pattern of effective coping. In contrast, when describing strategies for confronting prejudice and discrimination the degree of direct instrumentality and one's flexibility of coping seem to reflect alternative forms of coping. There was no relationship between the two variables suggesting that effective coping with some instances of prejudice or discrimination may be directly instrumental whereas under other circumstances one's flexibility of coping strategy may be more important than the degree of instrumentality exhibited.

Discussion

These findings suggest that an assessment of effective coping with discrimination must include examination of both situational and personal factors. The complex interactions identified above also suggest that directness of coping and flexibility of coping styles do not form a single dimension and that this distinction may be important in understanding how Black women cope with incidents of discrimination. Direct confrontation may not be the solution of choice for effectively coping with all incidents. These highly successful Black women were responsive to both personal and situational demands in coping with prejudice and discrimination.

For example, one Black woman who worked in a predominantly white institution successfully confronted an experience of personal prejudice by electing to purposively ignore it, choosing an alternative, equally satisfactory route for achieving her end. Alternatively, a woman whose work experiences were in a predominantly Black institution, confronted an experience of personal prejudice by directly challenging the individual who was discriminating against her, effectively challenging the person's racial stereotypes. This directly instrumental coping mode also proved effective for one woman who worked in predominantly white institutions and saw the source of one problem as institutional factors. However, a woman whose predominant work experience was in a Black organization elected a less actively instrumental coping strategy in successfully coping with an experience of institutional discrimination.

Although limited by sampling procedures, sample size, and method of data collection, the results of this secondary analysis provide strong support for a continued investigation of the effects of discrimination in the lives of Black women. Evidence from this study supports a multidimensional conceptualization of coping and suggests the importance of a distinction between personal and structural discrimination. It suggests that additional analysis of the effects of institutional discrimination on Black women is needed. In addition, examination of the effects of discrimination on the coping styles of a less highly visible group of Black women would complement this research and further our understanding of the multiple effects of institutional racism and sexism on the lives of individual Black women. This evidence adds further confirmation to the words of Joyce

Ladner (1971) who described the Black woman in the following way:

> One of the chief characteristics defining the Black woman is her [realistic approach] to her [own] resources. Instead of becoming resigned to her fate, she has always sought creative solutions to her problems. The ability to/ utilize her existing resources and yet maintain a forthright determination to struggle against the racist society in whatever overt and subtle ways necessary is one of her major attributes. (p.276-277).

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